United Nations E/CN.3/2009/18

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
12 December 2008

Original: English

Statistical Commission
Fortieth session
24-27 February 2009
Item 4 (b) of the provisional agenda*
Items for information: business registers

Wiesbaden Group on Business Registers

Note by the Secretary-General

In accordance with a request of the Statistical Commission at its thirty-ninth session** the Secretary-General has the honour to transmit to the Commission, for information, the report of the Wiesbaden Group on Business Registers (formerly Round Table on Business Survey Frames). The Commission is requested to take note of the report.

* E/CN.3/2009/1.

** See *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 2008, Supplement No. 4* (E/2008/24), chap. I.A.

08-64566 (E) 311208

Report of the Wiesbaden Group on Business Registers

1. The 21st meeting of the Wiesbaden Group on Business Registers was held from 24 to 27 November 2008 at the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which had offered to host the event. This 2008 meeting of the Wiesbaden Group (formerly Round Table on Business Survey Frames), with a long-standing history of achievements, attracted 85 participants from 39 countries and international institutions. It is the sole international forum concerned with analysing and comparing the foundations of statistical systems, reflected also in the title of the 2008 meeting, "The Central Place of Business Register Systems in Response to Globalization Needs". The meeting was organized in seven sessions and a description of each session is provided in the present report. The Chair of the meeting was Mr. Andreas Lindner, OECD.

2. Following a long-standing tradition, the meeting started with country progress reports under Session 1. Some 32 reports were briefly presented, outlining new developments and solutions found. A synopsis of trends and issues will be prepared in 2009. The session was chaired by Mr. Lindner, OECD.

3. Session 2 on the "Need for global, integrated, statistical systems — identifying best practices" was divided into two subsessions: the producer perspective and the user perspective. Session 2a examined the producer's point of view, leading to important key conclusions, such as that new tasks for statistics should begin with (or be accompanied by) feeding additional information into the register system, that the business register is the backbone for business statistics and data combination but running a high quality register requires close cooperation with its statistical users in the statistical institutions, and that globalization forces statisticians to reconsider the appropriate statistical units. The Chair of the session was Mr. Roland Sturm, Germany.

4. Session 2b looked at the same topic from a user perspective. Main problems identified were lack of identity across observation units and the increasing need for more statistics, linking trade and structural business statistics (in particular by size-class). Also the need to expand data collection to services was stated. Linkage problems were the main user concern. This session was chaired by Mr. Lindner, OECD.

5. Session 3, "Costs and benefit of profiling", was chaired by Mr. John Perry, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. After having examined current practice, the session identified issues for future consideration, such as the role of multinational groups, how to manage monitoring dynamic business structures, quality control and the role of information technology and data-sharing needs across countries.

6. Session 4 focused on the latter aspect by looking at "Concepts and methods for information and data sharing". Important conclusions were that the business register system will have to increasingly link to administrative sources and to cooperate more actively with the other government bodies. Owing to their privileged status in terms of access to administrative data, the national statistical institutions have a comparative advantage. Therefore, their role needs to be changed from a mere customer requesting administrative data for statistical purposes to a proactive partner of the administration. Trust in official statistics is a key issue. The Chair of the session was Mr. Norbert Rainer, Austria.

7. "Projects on the improvement of business registers" was the theme of Session 5, chaired by Mr. Claude Macchi, Statistical Office of the European Communities (Eurostat). It made possible the identification of common problems, such as the lack of standardization of business register identifier (ID) and insufficient data sharing across registers. The quality of business registers as a central tool for future statistical design was underlined.

8. Session 6, "New areas of research", was one of the focal topics of the meeting, and hence was composed of three subsessions.

9. Session 6a, "Entrepreneurship indicators, business demography and small and medium enterprises (SMEs)", was chaired by Mr. Hartmut Schroer, Eurostat. Central themes were the measurement and the limitations thereof of high growth enterprises, the harmonized measurement of employment in business demography, and timely release of data. The outlook stressed the need to implement in the European Union/OECD data collection composite indicators on high-growth enterprises and the need to further harmonize employment measures in business demography.

10. "Integrating economic business statistics with trade" was the theme of Session 6b, chaired by Mr. Clancy Barrett, Canada. This linking, carried out by both Eurostat and OECD in a harmonized way (Joint Steering Group), was met with considerable interest from participants and is an innovative, promising exercise for globalization-related analysis. The difficult matching of trade registers and business registers can be considerably facilitated through linkable register frameworks.

11. Session 6c, chaired by Ms. Dominique Francoz, France, was entitled "Measurement of multinationals and enterprise groups". The difficulties in distinguishing headquarters, locations and groups entail delicate decisions for allocation. An important conclusion was that private data sources were inadequate for producing outward foreign affiliates trade in services (FATS) statistics. Work on Enterprise Group Registers in the European Union should be considered a tool for data sharing among States members of the European Union and should also provide a sampling frame for FATS surveys.

12. Session 7, "The needs and solutions in OECD accession countries, Brazil, India, Indonesia, China, South Africa (BIICS) and developing countries", was again divided into three subsessions. Session 7a, "OECD accession countries' experiences and responses", was chaired by Mr. Tim Davis, OECD. Countries could demonstrate successful integration of surveys and ambitious business demography programmes.

13. Session 7b, "BIICS countries' experience and response", chaired by Mr. Lindner, OECD, reported on business register redesign programmes with unique IDs for enterprises and local units, and business register updates and links to census programmes.

14. Session 7c, "Experience and response in developing countries", was chaired by Ms. Vitalija Gaucaite-Wittich, Economic Commission for Europe. It highlighted cooperation projects between national statistical institutions from developed countries and developing countries. These capacity-building programmes aim at helping developing countries to build up viable and comprehensive business register systems. Developing countries were encouraged to harmonize their methodological approaches with international standards.

Conclusion and future plans

15. The meeting provided a rich list of priority actions to be carried forward over the forthcoming years. The Steering Group of the Wiesbaden Group on Business Registers will formulate a multi-year programme. The next Wiesbaden meeting will be held from 27 to 30 September 2010 in Estonia as host country. The terms of reference of the Wiesbaden Group are included in the annex to the present document.

Annex

Terms of reference of the Wiesbaden Group on Business Registers

Background

1. As a result of the 20th meeting in Wiesbaden, the Round Table on Business Survey Frames was renamed "Wiesbaden Group on Business Registers", abbreviated to "Wiesbaden Group". As such it conforms to the convention for naming United Nations city groups. The name change also reflects the changing role of business registers, which are increasingly being seen as the backbone of business statistics and as sources of statistical data in their own right, as well as an increased emphasis for the Group in defining a medium-term work programme.

2. The frequency of the Wiesbaden Group meetings in future will be every two years, starting in 2008.

3. After the conference the Steering Group met on 26 October 2007 (with delegates from Germany, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Australia, France, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, Eurostat and the Economic Commission for Europe) and discussed the future of the Wiesbaden Group under the following topics:

- Purpose and objectives
- Future workplan
- Composition and role of the Steering Group
- Road map and next meetings of the Wiesbaden Group

Purpose and objectives of the Wiesbaden Group on Business Registers

4. The Wiesbaden Group on Business Registers is a United Nations city group. Its traditional purpose is to provide a forum for the exchange of views and experience and the conduct of joint experiments related to the development, maintenance and use of business registers to support survey sampling and other statistical activities related to the production of business statistics. The Wiesbaden Group is an informal body and participation is on a voluntary basis. Participants, however, are expected to contribute at an expert level to the programme of the meetings.

5. The conferences of the Wiesbaden Group are the platform where problems, developments, projects, ideas, concepts and aspects of the construction, maintenance and improvement of business registers are presented and discussed. By this, the Group brings together experts and responsible persons on business registers who could use the experiences of others to promote and bring forward their own ideas for the development of business registers. In particular, the Wiesbaden Group tackles forward-looking aspects and aims to identify new challenges concerning business registers.

6. The Wiesbaden Group recognizes the demand both for information on business register developments and for common guidelines and recommendations on

different issues associated with business registers. There is a range of existing and emerging issues that require expert input to develop and promulgate approaches.

7. Therefore, the Wiesbaden Group intends to produce a range of outputs for different kinds of users, including international bodies, senior managers in national statistical institutions and organizations, in the process of developing business registers. The most visible outputs of the Group besides the conferences are the written papers, which give an in-depth view of current business register developments. All Round-Table papers are available on the websites of the host organization and of Eurostat. Additional value could be gained by circulating the summary reports produced by session conveners, the host organization and/or the Steering Group to specific international bodies.

8. Although its mandate does not emanate from a formal body, the Wiesbaden Group has expressed a desire to increase its emphasis on the provision of guidelines, recommendations and approaches for advancing issues related to business registers. The Wiesbaden Group anticipates, on the basis of its discussions and work programme, making recommendations regarding the consideration and/or adoption of certain practices or global-level standards for business registers to the United Nations Statistical Commission.

9. The Wiesbaden Group recognizes that it has a dual role. On the one hand, many participants are expecting the exchange of experiences and ideas at an advanced level, while on the other hand the Wiesbaden Group is aware that it should be the global forum on business registers and therefore has to respect the needs and interests of countries still developing business registers. The challenge will be to find the right balance.

Workplan and major topics of the next conference(s)

10. The challenges for business registers resulting from globalization have already been highlighted in previous conferences. The next meeting will advance work on further aspects of globalization. The focus for the period until 2010 will be on the following topics.

Profiling (costs and benefits)

11. Profiling is a method to analyse the legal, operational and accounting structure of an enterprise group at national and global levels, in order to establish the statistical units within that group, their links and the most efficient structures for the collection of statistical data. Profiling improves the quality of the business register, its use as a survey frame and source of information. It improves the cooperation with the respondents and the delineation of the statistical units in reality. The main hindrance to profiling is its cost. With a mandate from the Steering Group, Australia and the United Kingdom are setting up a work schedule for the development of a measurement tool on the costs and benefits of profiling.

Concepts and methods for information and data sharing

12. In the economic sphere, fundamental changes have taken place in organizing the process of economic activities more efficiently using different strategies and adapting to new models of national and international operations. Globalization

therefore has an enormous effect on data production and fundamentally changes the requirements for data collection and interpretation. In consequence, business registers have to deal with changing requirements on information to be held and shared because of the globalization process.

Business registers and business statistics in developing countries

13. Back-to-back with the 20th meeting of the Round Table on Business Survey Frames, a special workshop for developing countries was held. The workshop brought together 18 developing as well as developed countries, and discussed the prospects of supporting other nations in their developments in the field of business registers and register-based business statistics. In the future, a session within the official agenda of the conference will deal with the needs of the countries starting up business register and register-based business statistics. The main objective is to provide an extensive information database of best practices and, in the longer term, training materials.

Composition and roles of the Steering Group

14. The Steering Group comprises both national statistical institutions and international organizations. Current members of the group are Australia, Eurostat, France, Germany, OECD, ECE, the United Kingdom and the United States of America (Bureau of Labor Statistics).

15. The Steering Group is chaired by the current host organization. The tasks of the Group are:

- To assist the host of the next meeting on matters relating to the agenda and the contributions.
- To promote and most visibly disseminate the outputs of the Wiesbaden Group.
- To actively engage the Statistical Commission and other senior management forums to promote the work of the Wiesbaden Group and seek their inputs regarding future activities.
- To develop links with other relevant international bodies, for example, the World Bank, to ensure support for attendance by developing countries.
- To ensure coordination with meetings on related topics, for example the Joint Meeting of ECE or others.

Schedule/road map

2009: Joint ECE/OECD/Eurostat seminar on business registers

2010: Meeting of the Wiesbaden Group on Business Registers

2010: Evaluation and revision of the terms of reference